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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to examine what daily newspapers are doing in response to readers' criticism and to determine how widespread the use of accountability systems is and whether or not newspaper editors are satisfied with the systems. A two-page questionnaire was mailed to the highest ranking editor listed for each of the 200 daily newspapers selected. Of those editors responding, 70 newspapers--or about 52 percent of those studied--have a formal system of accountability to their readers. Another 34 percent have informal procedures for dealing with readership criticism, and only 23 percent (31) of the 135 editors responding said they had no system of accountability. The most prevalent system of accountability is that of mailing accuracy forms to persons mentioned in news stories. The practice of printing corrections under a standing head is popular, and the ombudsman concept is used by 12 of the responding newspapers. (RB)

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What Are Daily Newspapers Doing To Be Responsive To Readers' Criticisms?

A Survey Of U.S. Daily Newspaper Accountability Systems

An ANPA
News Research Center Study

By
Keith P. Sanders
University of Missouri

CS 201 466

The ANPA News Research Center in early 1973 commissioned Professor Keith P. Sanders of the University of Missouri School of Journalism to determine what systems of accountability to readers and news sources are being employed by daily newspapers in the United States.

The study was also designed to determine how widespread is the use of formal accountability systems and whether or not newspaper editors are satisfied with them.

Sanders' report of study findings and method follows.

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What Are Daily Newspapers Doing To Be Responsive To Readers' Criticisms?

A Survey Of U.S. Daily Newspaper Accountability Systems

By

Keith P. Sanders

The role and performance of the press have always been prime targets for criticism in America. The 1960's, however, saw a considerable increase in both the amount and nature of press criticism, so much so in fact that many now see a credibility gap of crisis proportions between newspapers and the public. In an effort to do something about this gap, a number of newspapers in the mid and late 1960's moved to formulate procedures to be more "accountable" to their readers and the general public. This study sought to find out what U.S. daily newspapers are doing in the accountability area.

News Research for Better Newspapers, Volume 6 Now Available From ANPA Foundation

Volume 6 in the series "News Research for Better Newspapers" is now available from the ANPA Foundation.

Like Volumes 1 through 5, Volume 6 is a compilation of News Research Bulletins issued during 1971 and 1972 by ANPA News Research Center.

Data contained in Volume 6 includes audience characteristics; newspaper content and readership; credibility and accuracy; editorial policy, administration and personnel; communicator studies; research methods; census data; youth and children; and polls and surveys.

This is the first volume to be edited by Dr. Galen R. Rarick who succeeded the late Dr. Chilton R. Bush as director of ANPA News Research Center and as editor of the series.

Volume 6 is available from the ANPA Foundation, this address. Cost of the volume is $3. The complete set (Vols. 1-6) is available for $12.

Pollster George Gallup, at a meeting of the International Press Institute in Ottawa in 1969 said, "Never in my time has journalism of all types -- book publishing, television, radio, newspapers, magazines, movies -- been held in such low esteem." Several reasons have been put forth for this alleged low esteem and the accompanying credibility gap. Perhaps the most plausible explanation is that the public has of late been frequently bombarded with criticisms of the press from official and quasi-official groups and political figures.

The 1960's were violent years. There were race riots in several major cities, a violent confrontation at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago and demonstrations at Kent State and many other universities. Commissions appointed to investigate these and other incidents were highly critical of the role of the mass media. Vice President Agnew blasted the media for being both "elite" and unresponsive to the public. Representatives of minority groups placed much of the blame for the failure to equalize civil rights at the doorstep of the "establishment" media.

Many newspapers have undertaken rigorous examinations of their performance. They have followed two basic approaches: internal criticism and external criticism. William Blankenburg dealt with internal criticism approaches in ANPA News Research Bulletin No. 9, June 3, 1970. The current study is concerned with external criticism. It goes beyond that, however, in that the various procedures used by newspapers today are not merely attempts to seek criticism from the public but are more generally attempts to establish effective two-way communication with readers.

The word "accountability" is perhaps an unfortunate one to use in describing attempts in this area. It is a word saturated with connotation and hence very much open to misunderstanding. Many journalists react quickly and strongly to the word. They do not like the idea of being accountable, sensing it as a threat to basic professional freedom. Given this interpretation of the word, it is not surprising that they see the establishment of a local press council or an ombudsman as automatically resulting in the reduction of their control over their professional work.

Methodology

Questionnaires were sent to 200 editors across the country. For sampling purposes the country was divided into nine geographic regions and the newspapers were assigned to one of four circulation categories.

The regions were as follows: New England (Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut); Northeast (New York, Pennsylvania, New

Jersey, Maryland, Delaware, Washington D.C.); Mid-Atlantic (Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee); Southeast (Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina, Florida); Midwest (Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri); South (Texas, Oklahoma, Louisana, Arkansas); North Plains (North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Wyoming, Montana, Idaho); West (Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona); and Far West (Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Alaska, Hawaii).

The circulation categories were (1) More than 100,000; (2) 50,000 to 99,999; (3) 20,000 to 49,999; and (4) Less than 20,000.

Most U.S. daily newspapers (approximately 65 per cent) have circulations of less than 20,000 and relatively few have circulations larger than 50,000 (approximately 15 per cent). Consequently, it was decided to undersample the small circulation newspapers and to oversample the large circulation newspapers. Fifty newspapers from each circulation category were selected at random from *E & P Yearbook*. Within each circulation stratum newspapers were selected proportionately from each region. Thus the final sample represented a modified proportional stratified sample.

A two-page questionnaire was mailed to the highest ranking editor listed for each of the 200 daily newspapers selected. One-hundred-thirteen responses were received within a month of the mailing. A follow-up letter resulted in an additional 22 responses, bringing the total responses to 135, or 67.5 per cent. By circulation categories the response rates were: 76 per cent for the largest newspapers, 60 per cent for the 50,000 to 100,000 category, 78 per cent for the 20,000 to 50,000, and 56 per cent for the smallest category. The West (86 per cent) and the Mid-Atlantic (80 per cent) regions had the highest responses while by far the lowest response was recorded by the Southeast region.

Editors were asked to indicate whether they had any formal system of accountability, to describe the system, if any, and finally to evaluate the system's effectiveness. The editors were encouraged to send with their completed questionnaires any news clippings, advertisements, staff memoranda and the like that might be useful in providing a more complete description about how their systems operate.

Most of the newspapers responding indicated that they have some system of accountability to their readers. However, the nature and the purpose of the systems vary considerably. A summary of the findings is presented in Table I.

Findings

Only 31 of the editors responding said they have no formal system of accountability. The most prevalent "systems" of accountability consisted of regular examination of errors and the publication of corrections. It might be argued -- and several editors did -- that such a procedure is not a system of accountability at all but merely a sound journalistic practice of housekeeping. The same might be said of accuracy forms sent to news sources to check on errors, a system used by 18 of the responding editors. On the other hand, accuracy forms published in the newspaper as a means of encouraging readers to report errors and to provide general feedback, used by four of the responding editors, clearly constitute a formal system of accountability.

Twelve of the 135 newspapers sampled have a staff ombudsman, "Mr. Go Between" or the like. Another five newspapers are planning to start such a program of accountability. There also are twelve newspapers that have editorial advisory boards to act upon complaints.

There would appear to be no connection between accountability practices and either geographic region or circulation size. There is some evidence, although slight, to suggest that newspapers in the South are less likely than other newspapers to organize formal systems of accountability and that newspapers in the large metropolitan areas in the Northeast and Midwest regions are more likely to have ombudsman-type programs. Of the twelve newspapers that indicated a current use of an ombudsman, eight had circulations of more than 100,000. Since the position of staff ombudsman can quickly develop into a full-time job, it is not surprising that the large newspapers would be able to afford such a person and the smaller newspapers would not.

The only other discernible connection between circulation size and accountability procedures was that all of the four newspapers that indicated use of a press council have less than 50,000 circulation. (Four larger newspapers, however, reported that they have an advisory board.)

Ombudsman Programs

The word "ombudsman" is Scandinavian and refers to a governmental official empowered to hear complaints from the public and to do something about them. He functions, in short, as a representative of the people. The idea of creating an ombudsman or people's representative on newspaper staffs was proposed by A. H. Raskin in an article, "What's Wrong With American Newspapers," that appeared in the June 11, 1967 issue of *The New York Times Magazine*.

Raskin wrote:

> That is the point of my proposal that newspapers establish their own Department of Internal Criticism to check on the fairness and adequacy of their coverage and comment. The department head ought to be given enough independence in the paper to serve as an Ombudsman for the readers, armed with authority to get something done about valid complaints and to propose methods for more effective performance of all the paper's services to the community, particularly the patrol it keeps on the frontiers of thought and action.

Barry Bingham Sr., chairman of the board, and Norman E. Isaacs, executive editor, quickly picked up Raskin's proposal and moved ahead that same year to establish an ombudsman program for the *Courier-Journal* and *Louisville Times*. John Herchenroeder, at the time assistant to the executive editor and for 20 years city editor, was named ombudsman. He has retained the position since and has become the best-known and probably most successful newspaper ombudsman.

Several other newspapers have followed the Louisville project with ombudsman-type programs of their own. As might be expected, ombudsman systems vary greatly in nature and scope; they clearly are tailor-made to meet the unique needs and capabilities of each newspaper. The larger the newspaper the more likely it is that the ombudsman will require a full-time effort on the part of the person who fills the position. The smaller the newspaper the more likely it is that there is no formal ombudsman program as such but rather the editor or publisher, by nature of his personal contacts with citizens of his smaller community, will act informally as an ombudsman. In some cases the ombudsman writes a regular column, but in others his primary function is the immediate correction of errors.

Few newspapers even use the term "ombudsman," prefering instead to use an easier-to-pronounce and more intuitively descriptive term such as "Mr. Go Between," "Reader Contact Editor," or "Public Access Editor." Bingham noted, not long after the start of the Louisville program, "Most people I've run into have trouble pronouncing the word, and a lot of them joke about it, but it is perfectly obvious they know the intent -- and I've gathered they like and respect it." Herchenroeder has been called "omnibusman" and "Dear Omnipotent." Whatever the system and by whatever name the purpose remains the same: to provide the public with a direct line to the newspaper with the promise that something will be done about complaints.

Although the Louisville ombudsman program has been

described frequently elsewhere, no discussion of accountability programs would be complete without at least a brief explanation of how it operates. The Louisville program has been a success largely for two reasons. First, Bingham and Isaacs picked a highly respected person, both within the community and within the newspaper organization, and, more importantly, gave him the authority to carry out the job as he saw fit. Second, the ombudsman concept was, and is, heavily promoted in both newspapers.

Isaacs noted in early 1968, "The advantages (of the ombudsman program) are many. But it would seem to me to contain grave backfire possibilities for the newspaper that looked on the function as a 'PR gimmick.' A newspaper has to be deeply earnest about the whole thing – and to give the assignment to someone good enough and important enough to make it work."

3,000 Calls A Year

Readers of the Louisville newspapers are encouraged to call the ombudsman at any time, night or day. The calls go directly to the ombudsman. Night-time calls are recorded. Herchenroeder received approximately 400 calls (most of them complaints, but also some suggestions, questions and even some compliments) the first year and nearly 500 the second. The number has now grown to nearly 3,000 a year. The complaints deal not only with every aspect of the news function of the newspapers but also with the advertising and circulation departments. Complaints of errors and inaccuracies are taken directly to the reporter or editor involved. Corrections are printed under the heading of "Beg Your Pardon" in the *Courier-Journal* and under the heading of "We Were Wrong" in the *Louisville Times*.

Advertisements promoting the ombudsman service frequently explain how a particular complaint was handled. Occasionally, calls to the ombudsman lead to the publication of articles explaining how a newspaper operates, what an editor is and what he does, and how news decisions are made.

The Louisville experiment has been worthwhile so far as Bingham and Isaacs are concerned. Bingham has said that the points raised by readers are all interesting in various ways and are indicative of how misunderstandings about the newspapers arise, often with little or no justification. Isaacs has likened the ombudsman function to that of an Early Warning System. "For the first time we have a continuing flow of information about reader reaction. We thus have the opportunity to make quick assessments of whether what we have done is of a serious nature or not."

Ombudsman-type programs are also operated by the

following newspapers: *Wilmington* (Del.) *News* and *Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Minneapolis Star*, *Delta Democrat-Times* (Greenville, Miss.), *Grand Rapids* (Mich.) *Press*, *Journal Herald* (Dayton, Ohio), *Salt Lake Tribune*, *New Castle* (Pa.) *News*, *Omaha World-Herald*, *Milwaukee Journal*, and *Express* (Easton, Pa.). Also known to have ombudsman-type programs but not included in the sample for this study are *Rockford* (Ill.) and *Register-Republic*, *Journal and Courier* (Lafayette, Ind.), *Observer-Dispatch* (Utica, N.Y.), and *St. Petersburg Times*.

The Wilmington newspapers instituted their program in the fall of 1972. The ombudsman has the title of public editor and he functions as an assistant to the executive editor. The public editor receives complaints about accuracy, fairness of coverage and the like. He follows up on each call and writes corrections where needed. The service is promoted by small announcements in both newspapers. A special feature of the public editor's job is to write a four-or-five times-a-week column that informs the public how newspapers operate, how "foul-ups" occur, and generally how to open lines of communication.

At the *Washington Post* the ombudsman has a three-fold function. First, he responds to individual complaints from the public about various aspects of the newspaper's coverage. Second, he undertakes internal criticism of editorial performance. This takes the form of memoranda to various editors pointing out everything from lapses in coverage to grammatical inconsistencies. In this capacity the ombudsman sometimes meets with top editors of the newspaper to give an oral appraisal of performance. Third, he performs as media critic. Once a week the ombudsman writes a column, "The News Business," in which he discusses the performance of the news media. Although the *Post* is frequently discussed, the column is not restricted to just the newspaper.

At the *Minneapolis Star* the ombudsman's function is filled by the assistant to the editor and he carries the title of "Reader's Referee." News clippings, usually stories of controversy, are regularly mailed out to people mentioned in the stories to be evaluated by them. The "Reader's Referee" checks out responses to these clippings and makes corrections when needed. Separate forms are used to record complaints and comments telephoned or mailed to the newspaper. Additionally, the "Reader's Referee" has the power to function as an in-house critic without waiting for reader reaction.

In addition to this ombudsman-type program, the *Star* publishes a weekly column by its editor that "takes readers behind the scenes of our operation, trying to explain why we

do what we do. We make a special effort to run news stories about public criticisms of the newspaper."

A Variety of Duties

At the *Grand Rapids Press* the ombudsman is the editor for public affairs. His duties include not only those of an ombudsman but also those relating to special programs such as Newspapers in the Classroom, special promotions, preparation of promotional advertising and delivering public speeches. A major part of his job is to process accuracy forms and to have corrections printed under the standing head of "Getting It Straight." The editor for public affairs meets frequently with interested groups to explain general policies and how specific stories were handled. The ombudsman function is not actively promoted but the editor thinks that readers are well aware that the *Press* is willing to make corrections promptly.

"Direct Line" is the name given to the ombudsman-type program at the *Journal Herald* in Dayton. Direct Line is an adjunct to Action Line and both are operated by the same person who reports directly to the managing editor. He is authorized to go directly to any staff member in any department to seek answers to questions or determine the accuracy or adequacy of news coverage. Direct Line is promoted by an occasional story in the paper and by the regular appearance of a boxed story explaining the operation and promising that "your report gets immediate attention by top management of the *Journal Herald.*"

A March 10, 1973 story on Direct Line explained, "Direct Line is an ombudsman (problem-solver) for readers who want to complain or comment about the news in their morning paper. The idea is to make the paper better. Sometimes, however, it's a matter of explaining to readers how decisions are made and judgments reached. The idea is to show that professional skills and logic are involved, not just 'because we've always done it that way'."

The story also reported that the Direct Line editor is "not a 'cushion' between the public and the newspaper's editors. He's there to see that the public gets answers and to end the myth that 'it never does any good to complain to the paper'."

One of the smallest newspapers (circulation 24,000) currently using an ombudsman-type system is the New Castle (Pa.) *News.* "Reader's Contact" is the title, and the position is filled by the managing editor who reports to the co-publisher/general manager. Readers are urged, through occasional stories and frequent publication of boxed Reader's Contact notices, to phone or write Reader's Contact with

complaints and comments. The complaints are discussed with the reporter and/or editor involved, and the findings are passed on to the person who made the complaint.

A written or oral report is made to the general manager. Publication of corrections is made whenever needed. The Reader's Contact also writes a regular column, "Good Grammar," which points out and corrects errors of grammar made in the newspaper.

Reader Reaction Encouraged

At the Omaha *World-Herald* the executive editor oversees the total accountability efforts of the newspaper. In addition to sending out accuracy forms and following through on them, each department head is expected to keep boxscores on staff members regarding errors, mishandling of stories and the like. Through a regular column, "Your Newspaper," in the Sunday edition, reader reaction is encouraged and explanations are made about how the newspaper functions. The newspaper also runs other features ("Public Pulse" and "Other Points of View") to encourage reader participation and to provide a sounding board.

The ombudsman at the Milwaukee *Journal* is called the reader contact editor. Attention is called to the availability of the reader contact editor through regular advertisements. He writes a weekly column, "Report to Our Readers," that runs on Sundays. The reader contact editor is encouraged to take the side of readers in investigating complaints and taking appropriate action. He reports directly to the editor.

Prior to the establishment of the reader contact editor position, the *Journal* ran "How Are We Doing?" coupons encouraging readers to report any inaccuracies. The *Journal* also has monthly community relations dinners in which a dozen prominent citizens and representatives of various groups in the community are invited to dinner and an evening of discussion of the newspaper's performance and policies.

The executive editor functions in an ombudsman-type role on the Easton *Express*. The newspaper prints, about twice a month, a column called "Express Yourself" in which readers are encouraged to submit complaints. The column is also used occasionally to explain or to introduce a policy. The editors are considering an "Error Corner" addition to the newspaper.

The *Delta Democrat-Times* was just organizing its ombudsman program at the time the study was conducted. The plan calls for an ombudsman to reply to complaints and queries on matters regarding the newspaper's own product and activities. Accuracy forms will be sent out to randomly selected individuals in the news. The program will function

alongside the newspaper's active press council.

No information was received outlining the ombudsman function on the Salt Lake *Tribune;* however, the newspaper operates an interesting "Common Carrier" program, similar in many ways to an ombudsman. It will be discussed later in this study.

The *St. Petersburg Times,* Rockford *Morning Star* and *Register,* and Lafayette *Journal and Courier* were not among the newspapers randomly selected for inclusion in this study; however, a brief summary of their ombudsman programs is presented here to round out the discussion on this system of accountability.

The St. Petersburg ombudsman has the title of public access editor. His sole job is to represent the reader. Every reader who writes or calls gets an answer by phone or mail. His job is not to defend the paper; his job is to articulate the position of the complaining reader. Every error is corrected the day after the complaint on page 2 under a standing head, "We Erred, We're Sorry." Occasionally the public access editor writes a column taking the paper to task in summation of readers' comments about stories.

In addition to his other duties, the associate editor of the *Journal and Courier* in Lafayette, Ind., serves as ombudsman. The program was launched in September 1971 and has met with a great deal of success, at least in the eyes of the ombudsman and the publisher.

"The Big O," as the ombudsman is nicknamed, spends 12 to 15 hours a week on the project. A written report is prepared on each call or letter received and each report requires an answer from the editor or other executive toward whose department a complaint is directed. The ombudsman program is extensively promoted in the form of regularly published boxed stories urging readers to call, promotional advertisements and a feature, "Focus on the Ombudsman."

Covers All Departments

A particularly ambitious ombudsman program is the one operated at the Rockford *Star* and *Register.* Because of the public's difficulty in handling "ombudsman," the title "Mr. Go-Between" is used. From the inception of the program in January 1972 Mr. Go-Between has been given authority to operate in all departments of the two newspapers. The publisher, in deciding to give the ombudsman such sweeping authority, reasoned that the image of the newspaper was the result of the work of all departments and that therefore the ombudsman should be concerned with the total product.

Each edition of the Rockford newspapers carries a box on page 3 telling readers how they can contact Mr. Go-Between.

Every worthwhile complaint or suggestion is written up in detail. A deadline is assigned for the staff member involved. Mr. Go-Between also performs more directly as an internal critic by assuming the role of a veteran Rockford reader and then critiquing all editions of the newspapers daily. The written critiques are sent to the executive editor and to the publisher. The newspapers plan to experiment with a monthly critique journal for members of the news department, to be produced by the ombudsman and the executive editor.

Pleased With Results

Without exception, newspapers using some kind of ombudsman system are satisfied with the overall results, if not with all the specific aspects. It is, perhaps, too early to evaluate how well the ombudsman programs have worked; the oldest such program was started only six years ago. However, those who have tried it seem to echo the words of Robert C. Maynard, ombudsman of the *Washington Post:* "It is impossible to offer you at this point a valid assessment of the ombudsman concept as it has been employed here, but I think we are all sufficiently impressed with it to want to see it go on."

Most editors think that the readers are pleased that the newspapers "care" about their opinion, and are willing to do something about them. Most editors also seem to think that they have been able to develop a better awareness of the needs of the readers and what they are thinking about. Some editors note changes in coverage procedures due to comments received through the ombudsman. Finally, some indicated that they picked up good story leads from readers.

The ombudsman approach is not without its problems, however. The ombudsman's position is a demanding one requiring considerable time and a great deal of tact. As the reader's spokesman, the ombudsman is not always likely to gain the favor of his fellow staff members.

Accuracy Forms

It is safe to say that almost every newspaper makes every possible effort to eliminate errors. Errors still occur, however, and how to deal with them becomes a matter of importance to both reader and editor. There would appear to be two basic approaches to the problem: internal and external surveillance. Most newspapers have some system for dealing internally with errors, either through an ombudsman or more likely through the normal line of editorial authority. The "accuracy form" approach is a method of external surveillance.

The sending of "accuracy forms" to persons mentioned in news stories may have been done at one time or another by the majority of U.S. daily newspapers. Eighteen (13 per cent) of the editors responding in this study indicated that they use some kind of accuracy form. Sixteen others said they had used them recently. Several editors are planning to start using such forms. In addition, four editors said they regularly publish an accuracy form inviting readers to comment on errors.

The manpower requirements for mailing accuracy forms and then processing the returns can quickly get out of hand. Primarily for that reason most newspapers limit the number of forms they send out. The number varies from four or five a day to 20 or 25 a month. Some newspapers use the forms only infrequently, particularly when they begin to receive complaints through other channels. The recipient selection process also varies considerably. Some newspapers randomly select stories while others purposely choose stories on the basis of their complexity or controversial nature. Some editors then send forms to all the persons mentioned in the selected stories while other editors send the forms to randomly selected persons mentioned or "key figures" mentioned. The editors report very good responses to these forms, ranging from 60 per cent to 100 per cent.

Clipping Mailed With Form

The accuracy forms, usually accompanied by a return envelope, normally have clipped to them the story in question. Typical questions include: "Are the facts in this story correct?" "Are the names and addresses correct?" "Is the headline correct?" "Is the story fair?" "Is all essential information included?" Some of the forms also ask for general comments on the performance of the newspaper.

The Seattle *Times* gets additional mileage by asking, "Which type of news or features do you find most interesting or helpful?" The Enid *Morning News* also asks: "Do you have any suggestions for improving the contents of the paper?" and "Can you give us any news tips?" A cover letter of explanation usually accompanies the form. The Seattle *Times* begins its accuracy form this way: "We at the Seattle *Times* would like to know how close we're coming to our target in our quest for accurate reporting. In our hurry to get your Seattle *Times* to you promptly, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, we're likely to err once in a while. With your help we can find out if we made a mistake in this story which concerns you. We'll use your suggestions to reduce our errors in the future."

Responses to the accuracy form letters usually are routed

to the ombudsman or some other single individual or to the department head most directly involved. The "errors" are then checked out, usually by going to the reporter involved. Correction of the error may be accomplished by printing a "correction," by printing a complete followup article, or by some direct communication with the person who made the complaint via the accuracy form. Several of the editors stressed the need to "get back to" the person who returned the form.

In many cases the "error" isn't really an error at all but is a difference of opinion over news judgment or the like. Or perhaps it is simply a typographical error. In such cases the editors write or telephone the reader to inform him of the situation. In some cases the reporter who made the error is asked to write a letter of apology to the person offended by the error.

Form Published in Newspaper

The process of publishing accuracy forms is very much the same. The published forms, however, have the advantage of giving every reader a chance to complain about errors. This may be an important advantage because relatively few people in a community are ever mentioned in a news story and the "repeaters" tend to form an "elite" group. These accuracy forms vary in publication frequency from daily to weekly and vary in size from small two-column boxes to quite large displays occupying two and three full columns.

The editors have mixed reactions about the use of accuracy forms. Most who have tried the forms think they are worthwhile but some doubt that they're worth all the time they take up. Some have discarded the practice because they were receiving few complaints. Several, however, thought the practice was justified on public relations grounds alone. "People are glad to know that we care," wrote one editor. Another wrote, "In addition to keeping us on our toes, our accuracy forms have created a great deal of 'good will' for us in the community."

Virtually all the responding editors indicated that they are very concerned about correcting errors. Most newspapers print corrections as quickly as possible when needed. Some newspapers have clear-cut procedures to follow in making corrections. For example, some newspapers give the same prominence to a correction of a serious error that was given to the original story. This includes front-page publication if the original error appeared there. "Obviously you can't give a two-paragraph correction a 5-58 head, but we do try to display the correction in as prominent a position as the error," one editor explained. Another newspaper follows the

rule of always publishing corrections above the fold. Increasingly popular is the practice of publishing corrections under a standing head that appears regularly in a specified location in the paper, most frequently on the second page or local section page.

Seventeen newspapers (13 per cent of those responding) indicated that they are using the standing head method of making corrections. Information about standing head corrections was not specifically sought in the questionnaire, but the 17 editors mentioned the method as part of their description of one of the specified "systems" or as an "other" system. It is reasonable to assume consequently, that the practice of using standing heads is much more prevalent than the data here would suggest. The practice seems to be more common in the large circulation category, with nine of the 38 respondents indicating that they use the system.

The standing heads are short, simple and quite to the point. Some examples are: "CorreXions," "Pardon Us," "Beg Your Pardon," "Correction," "We Were Wrong," "Getting It Straight," "Setting The Record Straight," "We Erred, We're Sorry." Occasionally a brief explanation of how the error occurred is included. Sometimes a brief note is included encouraging readers to inform the newspaper about errors they spot. Several editors indicated that they planned to start the publication of such an "error corner." Usually, the corrections deal with easy-to-correct errors such as misspellings and the like. In the case of serious errors, most editors still prefer to publish a more complete and prominently displayed article to correct the problem.

Press Councils and Advisory Boards

The idea of having a group of journalistic laymen to advise newspapers is usually attributed to the 1947 report of the Hutchins Commission. The Commission essentially borrowed the idea from press councils existing abroad, particularly the Swedish Press Council. The idea was to establish an agency independent of both government and the press to consider the overall performance of the press.

Experiments with local press councils were begun in five small communities in California, Colorado, Illinois and Oregon in the late 1960's. Lowenstein has noted ("Press Councils: Idea and Reality," 1973, published by the Freedom of Information Foundation under a grant from the ANPA Foundation) that "Local press councils are, in effect 'advisory committees,' providing two-way communication between the newspaper and its public. On the other hand, national press councils are 'critical and appellate' committees. In concept and operation, they are quite different."

Sixteen editors in this study indicated that they are using some kind of lay advisory board. Four of these committees were called Press Councils, eleven were called Advisory Boards, and one was called the Bureau of Accuracy and Fair Play. They have in common a committee of citizens who provide the newspaper with input on its day-to-day performance.

Typical of the press council approach is that of the *Delta Democrat-Times* of Greenville, Miss. The council has been in operation nearly two years. The original council members were picked by Editor Hodding Carter III and his staff. At the end of the first year the original members of the council selected a new one-third of the 14-member board. The council meets once a month to consider complaints regarding the accuracy and fairness of the paper, two local radio stations and the local television station. Members of the council serve on a voluntary, non-paid, basis. Carter, in evaluating the council, said: "Although the council has not been as vigorous as I had hoped, it has begun to operate more effectively and to deal with substantive issues. I think it is definitely worthwhile and has pleased most of our readers."

Membership Rotated

The Greenville (Tex.) *Herald Banner's* Editorial Advisory Board consists of seven people with different interests. The membership is rotated every six months to involve more people and to get different views. The Board meets once a month for lunch – paid for by the newspaper -- to invite criticism, assess credibility and practice accountability. The basic purpose of the board is "to invite constructive criticism of our newspaper and to solicit ideas as to how we might improve our product." At least one staff member from each department attends each meeting. "We feel we have benefited by the board appreciably in the one-and-a-half years it has been in operation. We believe it has helped convince our readership that we are making an honest effort to eliminate errors," wrote Jerry Crenshaw, editor.

The Quincy (Ill.) *Herald-Whig* operates a Bureau of Accuracy and Fair Play patterned after one that used to be operated by the Minneapolis *Star*. The Quincy operation includes the use of a mailed accuracy form. The Des Moines *Register* and *Tribune* used to operate a Bureau of Accuracy and Fair Play but discarded it when it found that it was essentially duplicating the accuracy-correcting efforts followed by various editors.

One of the most elaborate advisory-type systems is the one used by the Salt Lake *Tribune*. In October 1970 the *Tribune* organized a new department called "Common Carrier."

"Common Carrier" essentially consists of a group of community leaders who review articles and submit them for publication. The details of the organization, duties and function of the department are explained in a set of by-laws. The board consists of five members appointed to two-year terms.

The *Tribune* solicits two nominations each from the governor, the mayor, the chairman of the Salt Lake County Commission and the president of the Women's Legislative Council. In addition, nominations from interested organizations are solicited through notices published in the *Tribune*. A representative cross-section of nominated leaders is then selected for membership. The board meets once a week at a luncheon meeting (paid for by the *Tribune)* which is not open to members of the *Tribune* staff other than the staff member appointed to serve as secretary of the board. The secretary is not allowed to vote or to express any opinions on substantive matters under consideration.

Position Papers Solicited

The board actively solicits from leaders of established organizations position papers on matters of considerable interest and importance in the community. The by-laws carefully spell out what types of organizations are to be considered. The Board will also accept similar position statements from individuals if (a) the statement submitted is of sufficient public interest, and (b) such individual or group cannot effectively make its position known through other and existing channels of publication in the *Tribune*.

The *Tribune* can refuse to publish a statement submitted to it by the board if, in the opinion of the editors, the statement is in violation of the law or would subject the paper to liability. Acceptable position papers are published under the "Common Carrier" column head. It is, perhaps, important to note that the *Tribune's* "Common Carrier" system is limited to publication of statements of opinion. The "Common Carrier" board is not empowered in any way to assess the performance of the *Tribune*. The primary purpose of the system is to provide a channel for diverse points of view.

The Lawrence (Kan.) *Journal-World* has a very informal advisory board, as do several other newspapers. The Lawrence experience is, nonetheless, worth describing. According to Publisher Dolph C. Simons, a number of serious community problems existed in Lawrence during the period 1969-1972. The newspaper made numerous efforts at that time to see what readers thought about the *Journal-World's* performance. Staff members met with a large number of groups in the community and in the University of Kansas to

assess the newspaper's role and performance. In the process, the newspaper tried virtually every system of accountability imaginable. These efforts included participation in a sensitivity program for the entire city administered by The Menninger Clinic. According to Simons, the accountability of the newspaper was discussed in almost every sensitivity session, regardless of the size or composition of the group involved.

Staff members continue to meet with community groups, and Simons thinks the effect has been to improve the newspaper. Simons did add the following caution: "It must be remembered, however, that the newspaper still must be run and managed in the manner desired by the editor or publisher. Individuals in these positions determine the policy of the paper. There is no question about the need for complete fairness in the news report, accuracy and depth of coverage, but policy, editorial policy, must be in the hands of the editor or publisher rather than in the hands of a group of well-meaning citizens."

Five of the editors in this study said they had tried advisory boards and had rejected the idea. The reason, in almost every case, for discarding the system was that it simply didn't help the newspaper. Meanwhile, however, several other newspapers are considering the press council/advisory board concept.

Other Systems of Accountability

Several editors described accountability systems not specifically mentioned in the questionnaire. These systems range from the well-organized to those not organized at all. A brief summary, however, will add to the picture of what is being done in the accountability area.

One off-shoot of the ombudsman and accuracy forms approach has been the calling of attention to the fact that readers know very little about how newspapers operate. One exchange between the Louisville ombudsman and a critic led Isaacs to write an article in which he said: "One thing that continually amazes those of us who put out newspapers is how little the members of the public understand what it is we really do -- and how much they assume." He then went on to discuss what an editor is and what he does and, more generally, how articles are reviewed.

Several newspapers have instituted a regular practice of writing explanatory columns and articles, some on a regular basis and some as the need arises. Larry Jinks of the Miami *Herald*, for example, writes a weekly column called "View from the Newsroom," in which he attempts to explain informally how and why the newspaper does what it does in

its news columns. The Charlotte *Observer* occasionally runs a "Report to the Readers" column on the way it was or explaining general policy matters. The Omaha *World-Herald* has run a similar column, "Your Newspaper," for seven years. The *Herald-Telephone* of Bloomington, Ind., has a similar column, "Back Talk," in which complaints are answered and general policy procedures are explained.

Other newspapers have taken surveys to assess their performance. These may be coupled with readership studies or done separately. The *Times* of Gainesville, Ga., for example, assigned its news staff to interview a cross-section of its readers to ascertain opinions about the newspaper. The editor reports that the information obtained has proved most useful and that he would like to do the study again, although it required a great deal of staff time. The *Jeffersonian* of Cambridge, Ohio has used surveys done by the local Jaycees. The *Chronicle-Telegram* of Elyria, Ohio is including some questions about its accuracy and fairness as a part of a large marketing study.

The Milwaukee *Journal* holds a monthly community relations dinner to which a dozen prominent citizens and representatives of various groups in the community are invited to discuss the paper's performance and policies.

Many newspapers are placing increased emphasis on Letters to the Editor. These papers are providing more space for letters and are more actively encouraging people to write. Many newspapers are also actively promoting "Opposing View" columns on the editorial page.

Summary

Most of the daily newspapers in the United States are doing something to be accountable to their readers. Seventy newspapers, or about 52 per cent of those studied, have a fairly formal system developed. Another 34 have fairly informal procedures of dealing with the matter of accountability. Only 31 (23 per cent) of the 135 editors responding said they had no system of accountability.

The most prevalent system is that of mailing out accuracy forms to persons mentioned in news stories. The practice of printing corrections under a standing head is popular and promises to be more so. The ombudsman concept is used by 12 of the responding newspapers. Several other newspapers are planning to start an ombudsman program.

Those who have implemented some kind of accountability system are generally pleased with the results, although they see the need for improvements.

There is evident, however, considerable opposition to the

entire accountability concept. Reporters and editors sometimes resent the ombudsman and, indeed, the basic idea of sending out accuracy forms to "check up on them." The process of obtaining external criticism is a time-consuming and expensive one.

The questionnaire used in this study did not seek information that would answer the question, "Is Accountability Good or Bad?" Indeed, the cover letter included the statement: "The object of the study is not to grind an axe for any one vehicle of accountability, or even to suggest that there should be such a vehicle. Rather, it is our objective merely to find out what is being done." Nonetheless, many comments about the general advisability of the concept were received.

A brief listing of such comments follows: "I am not persuaded that this subject of 'acountability' is of as burning interest to most citizens as newspaper buffs think it is," Evarts A. Graham Jr., St. Louis *Post-Dispatch.*

"Press Councils appear to me to be a serious threat to the control of news by the only people who can control it in a free society. They seem to be a way of imposing pressures for small-town conformity in a society which needs exactly the opposite," Graham.

"Newspapers had better steer clear of press councils, bureaus or lay advisory boards of any kind designed to encourage accuracy. Reputable newspapers will see to accuracy themselves by their own methods," John L. Blue, *Southeast Missourian*, Cape Girardeau, Mo.

"Your questionnaire would seem to imply that unless a newspaper has an ombudsman, a Bureau of Accuracy and Fair Play or a similar corrective device, it is sadly lacking in its responsibility to readers," J. Leonard Gorman, the *Post-Standard*, Syracuse.

"We try to treat every individual with the respect due him and at no time take advantage of the fact that we have a press and the public does not. When that policy is carried out, the newspaper needs no ombudsman, needs no Bureau of Accuracy and Fair Play, needs no press council and needs no complaint board," John W. Bloomer, the Birmingham *News.*

"We do not have, and I could not imagine our supporting, a 'press council' approach to building reader credibility. We feel it would be a complete infringement of basic press freedom, that members of a press council would approach their 'decisions' with the same level of prejudice that governs all of us and that no press council could or would spend the time sufficiently to learn the intricacies of newspaper operation so as to make educated determination as to press 'errors.' The ideas of staff ombudsman or a 'bureau of

accuracy' strike us as essentially 'gimmicks.' Similarly, 'accuracy forms' made available for random samplings or mailed to persons named in stories strike us as more of a publicity gimmick than a material contribution to the error problem," Martin S. Hayden, the Detroit *News*.

"Hasn't it become perfectly clear that this nation's press -- while so busy examining itself -- almost forgot to examine the people, places and things called for by its traditional role? Because of Watergate, we can now come out from under the rocks and be bold again -- that is until those in high places begin to attack us again and lead us to believe, by golly, that we'd better set up press councils, 'bureaus of accuracy,' etc., which serve as self-imposed intimidations. We don't need 'em," Bill Maddox, *The News*, Port Arthur, Tex..

TABLE I

Accountability Systems
Categorized By Newspaper Circulation

Circulation:	100,000+ N=38	50,000-99,999 N=30	20,000-49,999 N=39	Up to 20,000 N=28	Total N=135
System:					
Ombudsman	8(21%)	2 (7%)	1 (3%)	1 (4%)	12 (9%)
Press Council	0	0	1 (3%)	3(11%)	4 (3%)
Advisory Board	3 (8%)	1 (3%)	4(10%)	4(14%)	12 (9%)
Accuracy Forms Sent to Sources	7(18%)	5(17%)	3 (8%)	3(11%)	18(13%)
Accuracy Forms Published in Paper	3 (8%)	1 (3%)	0	1 (4%)	5 (4%)
Standing Head for corrections	9(24%)	3(10%)	2 (5%)	3(11%)	17(13%)
"Other" System	11(29%)	13(40%)	25(64%)	16(56%)	65(48%)
No Formal System	7(18%)	6(20%)	15(38%)	3(11%)	31(23%)

Several newspapers have more than one system of accountability. Percentages are based on the number of newspapers responding within the circulation category. For example, eight newspapers of the 38, or 21 per cent, responding in the largest circulation category indicate the use of an ombudsman program.